

### Lawmaker Urges Database Aimed at School Food Safety

#### Schakowsky Bill Would Track Fines, Suppliers, Illnesses

By David Jackson - Chicago Tribune

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Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) has introduced legislation designed to increase the safety of school meals by creating a national database on the inspection records of school food suppliers.

"Putting information in the hands of the ultimate consumers is a great way to empower people to make sure they have safe food," the congresswoman said.

Schakowsky said her proposal was prompted by a 2001 Tribune series on school food-safety breakdowns and by subsequent reports on an outbreak of a food-borne illness at a Joliet school.

The proposed database would list fines and enforcement actions taken against school food suppliers, as well as illness outbreaks and recalls associated with suppliers' products.

Officials at schools--as well as hospitals, nursing homes and child-care facilities--would be able to access the data from a Web site run by the federal Department of Health and Human Services in consultation with the Agriculture Department.

Lawmakers said they expect to consider Schakowsky's measure along with more than 30 other school food bills early next year, when Congress prepares to reauthorize child-nutrition programs. There is more legislative interest now in the safety and nutritional value of school food than at any time since the 1980s, officials said.

While Schakowsky's bill was welcomed by school cafeteria managers and food-safety advocates, industry officials said the dissemination of safety records could stoke unnecessary public fears and prove difficult for cafeteria managers to interpret.

Any money earmarked for the database would be better spent buying more food, said

Rosemary Mucklow of the National Meat Association.

Because Schakowsky's bill has not been analyzed by the Congressional Budget Office, it is not clear how much it would cost to run the database. Schakowsky said she did not think it would be very costly.

One critic said he feared the safety data could be misinterpreted by cafeteria managers and school food purchasers. Some plants accrue large numbers of safety infractions simply because they process more food, for example. In addition, many violations are minor and not indicative of safety problems.

### Advisory Panel Sought

The bill would create an advisory committee made up of education and health officials, consumer groups and industry representatives to recommend precisely what information would be included on school lunch suppliers. The secretary of health and human services also would have the authority to make grants to states to help them access and use the database.

Cathy Breeck, food-service director for the Kankakee school district, said she would use such a database. "Any information we can get will add to our ability to make sure about the safety of our product," Breeck said.

Seattle lawyer Bill Marler, who represents children and families in lawsuits over food-borne illness, said the database "will create an economic incentive for companies to have better safety records. The food-service managers and distributors should be able to look at the safety records of providers. That will enable them to make informed decisions."

During the past decade, school food-illness outbreaks have become more frequent as suppliers use distributors and brokers to ship prepackaged and frozen meals to schools across the country.

Food produced in one factory may be reworked in a second plant, then passed through a series of shipping companies. The brokers who deliver meals to schools often do not tell authorities where they got the food, and they rarely provide inspection reports on those plants. As a consequence, school officials rarely can get adequate information about the safety records of their producers.

### USDA System is Model

Schakowsky's proposed database is modeled in part on a system used by the Agriculture Department, which purchases about 17 percent of the food served in schools. Using internal agency records, the USDA reviews suppliers' safety records before granting contracts. Schakowsky's database would compile similar information on the remaining school food, which is purchased locally.

HHS and Agriculture Department spokesmen said officials have not yet studied Schakowsky's

bill and could not comment on it.

Another school-food bill, proposed by the American School Food Service Association, would require all school cafeteria managers to implement safe food handling and preparation practices, because many outbreaks stem from sloppy practices in kitchens where food is prepared and served.

In addition, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) has introduced a package that would require more stringent tests for disease-causing organisms and give schools more information about the safety records of food suppliers.